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iPads as Tools for Communication with Parents

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A quick Internet search regarding iPad use in classrooms will reveal that school districts across the country are purchasing iPads and similar tablets at a rapid rate. Accordingly, teachers are beginning to consider ways in which iPads can be used in their classrooms. During our recent work in an early childhood classroom (Beschorner and Hutchison, 2013) we learned that, although reading and responding to text has been shown as one important classroom use for tablet technology (Hutchison, Beschorner, Crawford-Schmidt, 2012), another important use may be as a tool for innovative parent communication. While following two preschool teachers who were using iPads in their classrooms for ten weeks, we noticed that they often used them to communicate in multiple ways with the parents of the children in their classes. For instance, the ease with which digital images, including photographs, videos, and screenshots, can be stored in the photo album and emailed at the touch of a button, simplifies sending photographs and videos to parents. Therefore, novel possibilities exist for sharing with parents.

This was an unanticipated use of the iPad, but the teachers expressed their delight at being able to share a child's work with their parents via email almost instantaneously. Interestingly, the parents also expressed their excitement by often responding to the emails. The parents would write replies such as, "Great use of the iPads! I love this!" After the study concluded, one parent shared, "I loved that the teacher was able to email her work to me so that I could see what she was up to in real time. I received class books and individual work through email multiple times, which I really enjoyed." In the current article, we highlight several ways that we've seen teachers use

iPads to communicate with parents. We hope that these ideas can be used as a starting point for the endless possibilities that exist with digital tools such as the iPad.

Digital Photographs

Digital photographs can quickly and easily be captured and disseminated with an iPad while children participate in many types of classroom activities. Although it is possible to email photographs to parents using a digital camera and a computer, teachers may not feel inclined to do this because of the multiple, time-consuming steps it takes to do so. However, the built-in camera and photo album on the iPad allows teachers to capture, store and share photos within one tool with only a few steps. Photos can be emailed, messaged or posted to twitter from within the iPad camera roll.

This practice has particularly exciting potential because teachers may be able to photograph classroom events that were previously difficult to share with parents. The teachers we observed often took digital photographs of classroom activities. Such activities cannot be accurately captured by sending home a report of them in a newsletter. Rather, frequently sharing photos of classroom activities can provide parents with a better sense of the classroom learning environment and learning goals. For instance, when learning about community helpers, the class we observed created a bar graph using sticky notes to signify what career in the community each student would like to pursue. On another day, the class worked together to build several large pyramids using plastic cups. These meaningful learning experiences would not ordinarily be visible to parents. However, the iPad was used to photograph the work and was almost immediately shared with parents. In this way, parents were given a window into the learning experiences of their children, which would normally not have existed.

Screen Capture

The iPad also makes it easy to capture student work, which would normally be erased, by taking a screen shot of the work. For example, in the early childhood classroom we observed, children often wrote on whiteboards before they had iPads to use. That writing was usually erased and never documented or shared. However, once the teacher began using iPads, she asked students to complete such work using a drawing app, such as Doodle Buddy, or the Magnetic Alphabet app. The teacher could then instruct students to take a screen shot of their work so that she could review it later, save it to a child's portfolio or share it with parents. In this way it allowed the work to easily be saved and stored or shared instead of erased and forgotten. When children used Doodle Buddy to write and draw, they often wanted to share their work with their parents. Many children would even make comments such as, "I am making this for my mommy," or "I am making this for my daddy," and would ask the teacher to email their work to their parents when they were finished. See Figures 1 and 2 for examples of student work on the iPad that was captured and shared with parents.

Screen shots can be taken by holding down the button on the top (the power button) and the button on the front (the home button) of the iPad. When the screen shot is taken, the iPad makes the sound of a camera taking a snapshot and stores the image in the photo album. Once the screen shot has been saved, it can be emailed to a parent using the email feature within the photo album.

Figure 1. Created by a child using Magnetic ABCs



Figure 2. Written by a child using Doodle Buddy



Digital Videos

Similarly to photographs, capturing and sharing a video on an iPad is relatively simple. Although they didn't video often, the teachers we observed found a few creative ways to use the video capabilities of the iPad to support learning. For example, they recorded a video of the song that was sung each morning as a greeting and shared it with parents. Digital video recording could also be useful in classrooms with older

students to record students reading aloud, student presentations, or a reader's theatre performance. For example, we learned of one teacher who recorded one student reading aloud each day (or engaging in another activity of their choice) and shared the video to a class twitter page. That teacher reported that parents were delighted to see their child's video, and the children were enthusiastic to share it with their parents. These classroom practices are valuable, yet they are rarely shared with parents. Using the iPad to record videos may allow parents the opportunity to view these classroom practices and further inform their conceptions of their child's performance in school.

Links to Digital Books

The preschool teachers we observed regularly used an app called Storykit. Using this free app, children can create digital books. The app allows the user to create digital drawings, type text, record audio, and insert photographs in the digital book. When the book is finished, the app creates a link, which can be emailed so that other people can read the book that was created. In the preschool, digital books were created independently and as whole class books. The links to these digital books were then shared with parents.

Video Conferencing

Another capability of the iPad, which holds particular promise for transforming parent communication, is the ease in which it can be used for video conferencing with apps such as Face Time, Skype, or Google Plus. Although much communication between parents and teachers can take place using notes, emails, and/or phone calls, there are times in which a face-to-face conference is necessary. However, it is often difficult to schedule a time that is convenient for both the teacher and parent. The teacher's iPad can become a useful tool to overcome this difficulty. If the parent has access to digital technology with video conferencing capability, such as a smart phone,

then the teacher and parent can have a discussion without the parent coming to the school. In this way, the iPad can ease the burden of communication for the teacher and the parent by eliminating the need to physically come to the school for a conference.

The Role of the iPad in Parent Communication

Teachers should consider how the iPad can facilitate transformative communication between parents and teachers in their own classrooms. In doing so, teachers must understand the use of digital technology within the communities they teach. Specifically, teachers must consider the parent's access to digital technology. However, due to increasingly important role of digital technology in the lives of many adults, it is likely that many parents will have regular access to email and other digital communication tools. Additionally, careful attention should be paid to the protection of the privacy of children's work. If multiple children are photographed or video recorded, sharing these images must be handled with care according to school or district policy. However, access to technology and the sensitivity of digital images should not discourage teachers from thinking about ways in which the iPad may transform the communication they have with parents. If these issues are considered carefully, the digital communication that the iPad allows for may change the nature of the contact between parents and teachers.

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